

Back-to-School in More Ways than One

For many, back-to-school means learning new routines, focusing on studies, and opening the mind to new opportunities.

For us on the Wellesley School Building Committee (SBC), back-to-school started last January. The *Wellesley High School Project* had to be broken down into manageable components to effectively assess all aspects of this complex project and seek areas of opportunity. The members of the SBC and School Committee have been ever mindful that the decisions derived from these studies must yield a High School building that meets Wellesley's educational needs and the construction standards of a long-term Town asset at a rational, financially responsible cost to the Town.

The following is a "back-to-school" review on the High School Project to date. We will continue to review these multiple components and share information as we endeavor to provide balance among priorities and to keep in touch with Town residents.

First, a rigorous review of the *Educational Program* (the components of the high school curriculum) provided the detail needed to define the *Architectural Educational Program* (the spaces needed to deliver the curriculum). The Educational Program, as developed by faculty and administration over many years, has made Wellesley High School the superior educational institution it is. Ultimately, the building design must enable this program for today and provide flexibility for future changes.

Next, the *Site* was evaluated: The *Land Use Working Group* assessed the constraints and opportunities afforded by the land parcels adjacent to the current High School site. Other land parcels in Wellesley were also evaluated for availability and suitability; these included discussions with Wellesley College and Babson College.

Major spaces, such as the gymnasium and auditorium, were reviewed. Curricular programs, extracurricular activities and levels of participation were all considered in the exploration of design options. The current gymnasiums and auditorium facilities are deficient in numerous areas and do not meet the Educational Program. Therefore, the SBC determined that a *new* auditorium will be included in the facility design and directed the architects to provide options using the current auditorium space to create a library/media center. Other major considerations such as *parking* and *community access* are still being evaluated.

Also important to design choice is the *construction impact*: Each design option requires a unique project plan, which will impact students, faculty and administration, neighbors and budget. A complex series of analyses is required to detail the impact of staging, construction vehicles movement, asbestos abatement, modular classroom/swing-space needs and facilities access (or lack thereof) during construction. These analyses must be completed for each option prior to final decisions.

But research and review are not enough. The best teacher is often experience and, in this case, we found relevant experience in neighboring school districts that have recently concluded high school building projects. Over the summer, the SBC toured a total of 10 facilities. We learned from the collective experience of these projects, which included renovation of historic buildings, other types of addition/renovations, and completely new construction. We learned what worked well and why; what others wished they had done differently; and what they considered worth additional cost or not. The findings of these 10 site visits will be the subject of our next article and will be presented at a meeting in September (to be scheduled).

Also over the summer, the Massachusetts School Building Authority (MSBA) visited Wellesley High School to conduct a “*Senior Study*.” The focus was 1) to assess the impact of the facility condition on the delivery of the Educational Program and 2) to evaluate the facility condition in terms of infrastructure. The engagement of the MSBA in the High School Building Project is critical; every effort is being made to align our process with that which they have charted. It is anticipated that the MSBA will conclude a “needs assessment” for all projects by the end of this calendar year.

The next decision milestone will be to narrow the options to two: one renovation/addition option and one all-new construction option. After that, we can publicly review the pros and cons of each prior to making a final determination of our recommended option to the Town and to the MSBA. Articles summarizing the work completed to date can be found on our website at www.wellesleyma.gov, (click on *School Building Committee*). While not exactly “extra credit,” these evaluations will help everyone become well educated on the project. We encourage you to review them and consider the decisions as they are made.

We also encourage you to stay abreast of the project progress by subscribing to the SBC email newsletter which provides updates and information on issues and decisions. To subscribe, please go to www.wellesleyma.gov and click on *School Building Committee* for further information. The SBC is committed to an open, candid process and welcomes your comments and questions. We can be reached by email at sbc@wellesleyma.gov or by telephone at Town Hall.

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